

Orange County's Chinatowns

During the pioneer era, Orange County had a small, but very visible Chinese population. By the 1860s, Chinese laborers were already at work on local construction projects; and by 1900, several local communities had their own Chinatowns.

In the 1870s, hundreds of Chinese worked on building railroads and irrigation systems in the area, and the first small Chinatowns began to emerge. Chinese agricultural workers grew and sold with own vegetables, or worked for local ranchers. They were especially prominent in the celery industry in the western part of the county in the 1890s. There were also businessmen who ran laundries, stores, and restaurants. Often they also served as labor contractors. A few Chinese also worked as household servants and cooks.

The permanent population was always small, especially after the 1880s, when the United States set strict limits on Chinese immigration. Most of the local residents were men; some sent money back to their families in China.

According to United States Census figures, Orange County's pioneer Chinese population peaked in 1900 with just 136 residents, including 54 in Anaheim, 25 in Santa Ana, and 16 in Orange. By 1920 the population had dropped to just 26. As the Chinese population declined after 1900, they were largely replaced as field workers by newer Japanese immigrants.

There were three principal Chinatowns in Orange County in the early days. They generally consisted of a few businesses, a rooming house or two, and some small homes. Some of the area would also be used to grow vegetables, or as the drying yards for the laundries. These settlements were considered something of a novelty, especially by local children. While some people avoided the Chinatowns, others enjoyed cordial relations with their Oriental neighbors.

Anaheim's Chinatown was always the largest. It was located along the 100 block of West Chartres Street – near the northwest corner of Lincoln and Anaheim Blvd. today. It was also the last of the local Chinatowns, surviving until about 1935.

Santa Ana's Chinatown grew up in the 1880s at the southwest corner of Third and Bush, with a few other stores located to the west on Main Street. It was burned to the ground in 1906 on orders of the Santa Ana City Council, after one of the residents was found to be suffering from leprosy. Some of the men moved west of town to a spot along the Santa Ana River where they reestablished their vegetable gardens. The last of the old time residents there moved back to China in 1923.

Orange's first Chinese settlement was along the 100 block of North Orange Street in the 1870s. In the 1890s a small Chinatown grew up on the Gardner Ranch on South Glassell Street, just north of the Santiago Creek. There were only three or four buildings there, and by 1910 the population was just ten men. The last of the residents moved away in 1924.